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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KIGALI 000842

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/C, DRL

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [RW](#)

SUBJECT: PRESS FREEDOM IN RWANDA: CHARGES OF HARASSMENT AND
GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

REF: KIGALI 790

Classified By: Poloff GLearned, reason 1.4 (d)

Summary

¶1. (U) During August, there have been several incidents of alleged threats, and one physical attack, against Rwandan journalists by unknown perpetrators. Two journalists have left the country, although one may return soon. GOR officials vehemently deny any official GOR involvement in negative actions directed at journalists, and the Minister of Internal Security has assured the Ambassador that a police investigation is underway. Ambassador and Emboffs have been in regular contact with the journalists, high level GOR officials, NGO representatives and diplomatic colleagues. Ambassador has insisted that the GOR take these accusations seriously, conduct a thorough investigation, and take action against anyone involved. There is little trust between the GOR and journalists alleging harassment (some of whom claim that cliques of high ranking government members are responsible for the threats and the one physical attack). However, senior members of the GOR do understand the importance of press freedom and its impact on Rwanda's ability to garner support for its development goals. After three weeks of accusations and counter-accusations, the facts are still unclear. End summary.

The Allegations

¶2. (U) There have been four journalists, all Rwandan nationals, involved in the August flare up of problems between the GOR and independent press. All have maintained various degrees of contact with Emboffs, primarily by cell phone text messaging. Of the four, three are editors of independent Kinyarwanda papers 'Umuko', 'Umuseso' and 'Umuvugizi'. The fourth, Lucie Umukundwa, is head of the Voice of America office in Rwanda.

¶3. (SBU) 'Umuko' editor Bonaventure Bizumuremyi fled to Kampala following the issuing of a summons to appear before the police, and an attempt by members of the Judicial Police to bring him in for questioning. This was purportedly in connection with an investigation of a potentially defamatory statement about President Kagame (Reftel). On 10 August, Bizumuremyi published in 'Umuvugizi' an open letter to Kagame apologizing for what he termed a typesetting error that resulted in an unintended insult.

¶4. (C) Multiple sources within the GOR have stated that

Bizumuremyi,s summons was issued by the head of the CID, who intended to question Bizumuremyi about the possible defamatory statement against Kagame. Prosecutor General Martin Ngoga stated that while he personally would not have summoned Bizumeremyi, the CID Director was acting within his authority when he did so. Ngoga also stated that he was satisfied with Bizumuremyi,s explanation and letter of apology, considered the defamation matter to be closed, and said Bizumeremyi faced no threat of being charged with defamation. He did say that Bizumuremyi would have to answer for his failure to respond to the summons, which is a routine step in police investigations in Rwanda. Emboffs have also received unconfirmed reports that police officers who attempted to detain Bizumuremyi were punished for violating proper procedures, since they had not been authorized to use force to bring him in for questioning. According to Belgian poloff and 'Umuco' colleague Jean Leonard Rugambage, Bizumuremyi was seriously considering returning to Kigali.

¶5. (C) The picture is less clear with respect to the case of VOA reporters Olivier Isatibasumba and Lucie Umukundwa (who is Olivier,s brother). On 15 August, poloff and PAO received reports that Isatibasumba had been attacked and threatened in Kigali by unknown assailants on the evening of 14 August. The assailants reportedly said the attack was in response to negative reporting about Rwanda. On 16 August, PAO met with Lucie and Olivier at the VOA,s office. Umukundwa and Olivier confirmed that they had not/not reported the incident to local police authorities but Lucie said she had attempted to report the case to director of the Rwandan National Police,s Criminal Investigation Division (CID). When he failed to return her call, Umukundwa then reported the matter to the Director of Military Intelligence.

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¶6. (C) During the week of 20 August, Umukundwa reported to PAO what she regarded as suspicious/threatening incidents that had prompted her to depart Kigali for Gisenyi, on the northwest border of Rwanda, where she spent four days before crossing into the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Prior to leaving Rwanda, Umukundwa also reported that an unknown high authority, in the Rwandan Government had told a VOA colleague that Lucie should come out of hiding and that if she fled Rwanda she would be tracked down and killed. On 28 August, Lucie reported to PAO and VOA Washington that she had made her way to Uganda, where she intends to stay until the matter is resolved.

¶7. (C) Umuseso, editor Charles Kabonero and Umuvugizi, editor Jean Bosco Gasisiba, who claim that there is a cabal of senior GOR officials intent on shutting down an independent press, have nevertheless continued publishing their papers, including stories very critical of the GOR, and maintaining contact with Emboffs. Gasisiba told Emboffs that National Security Service Director General Emmanuel Ndahiro held a meeting with five journalists (including Gasisiba, Kabonero, and Umukundwa) to address reports of media harassment. However, he reported no substantial commitment by Ndahiro to act on their accusations.

The GOR's Response

¶8. (C) In a 29 August conversation with the Ambassador, the Minister of Internal Security indicated that he was aware of the case involving the VOA correspondent and had instructed the police to conduct a thorough and rapid investigation. Multiple senior level officials have underscored the importance of due process and denied any government intent to harass journalists. All have said that any journalist who believes he/she has been harassed or threatened should follow normal procedures and report such incidents to the police. This creates a record which senior officials can then pursue should there be inadequate police action.

¶9. (C) In the case of the VOA correspondent, who was unwilling to file a formal complaint, the Minister of Justice volunteered to phone her directly to hear her views and former Ambassador to the US, Special Presidential Envoy to the Great Lakes Region Dr. Richard Sezibera, agreed that Embassy could provide the correspondent his personal cell phone number in an effort to move the situation forward. (Note: PAO subsequently informed Umukundwa of Sezibera's offer to speak with her directly about the matter, but she declined to do so. End note). Prosecutor General Martin Ngoga told polchief and poloff that there was no GOR effort to harass journalists. He offered to investigate any police officer or government official accused by a journalist of making threats against them.

¶10. (U) The High Council of the Press (HCP) conducted lengthy interviews with Umukundwa and her brother, visited the clinic where he was treated after being attacked, and has been in regular contact with the police. Their report on the matter is expected next week.

Embassy Engagement

¶11. (U) Over the past ten days, Ambassador has met and discussed these freedom of the press cases, particularly that involving VOA correspondent Lucie Umukundwa, with the Ministers of Internal Security, Justice, Finance, and Information as well as with the Director General of the National Security Services, the Special Presidential Envoy to the Great Lakes Region, and the Principal Private Secretary of President Kagame. PAO and poloff have had regular contact with the independent journalists, European diplomats, NGO representatives and members of the government including the Prosecutor General and the High Council of the Press.

¶12. (U) Ambassador has insisted that GOR must take these accusations seriously, conduct a thorough investigation of these complaints, and take action against anyone found to be involved. GOR officials vehemently deny any official GOR involvement in negative actions directed at journalists and the Minister of Internal Security has assured Ambassador that a police investigation is underway. The situation continues

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to be confusing and hard facts rare, especially with respect to the alleged attack and subsequent threats against VOA reporters and rumors of a small clique intent on disrupting independent newspapers critical of them and the GOR.

Comment

¶13. (C) After extensive attention to the subject, post believes that Bizumuremyi's case is largely resolved. While he will have to answer to charges of ignoring a police summons, it appears that he does not face the threat of further criminal charges. Indications are that Bizumuremyi will return to Rwanda soon, and even during this recent period UMOCO has continued to publish and has run other critical stories about the government. The facts in the VOA case are less clear. We do not dismiss reports of harassment and there appears to have been a physical attack. While the facts are unclear, it is critical that the government take steps to investigate these allegations and take action to prevent any such harassment.

¶14. (C) Those who allege a broad conspiracy against certain independent journalists have not provided any solid evidence or details of such a plot. The high ranking GOR officials Ambassador has discussed these cases with all have strenuously denied any government plot or conspiracy against the independent press and/or individual journalists and point out that it is not in the GOR's own self interest for these actions to take place. Embassy has had extensive discussions with senior government officials about democracy/rule of law issues and key officials are very much aware Rwandan actions in this area are key to their prospects for receiving

Millennium Challenge Account eligibility. In general, we have seen an increase in critical independent reporting being published in Rwanda over the past year. However, there is a fundamental lack of trust between some members of the independent press and key officials of the GOR. This lack of trust hampers communication. Freedom of the press is not a smooth progression in Rwanda, and there will continue to be problems. The fact that the United States and other friends of Rwanda take such issues seriously and engage the government directly will we hope promote positive developments.

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